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## Blogs, Cyber-Literature and Virtual Culture in Iran

By Dr. Nima Mina



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# **Blogs, Cyber-Literature and Virtual Culture in Iran**

By Dr. Nima Mina\*

Editorial Date: December 2007

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## **Introduction**

Since the beginning of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency in the summer of 2005, increased concerns about the Islamic Republic's nuclear program and its military use, the regime's provocative anti-Semitic rhetoric and its systematic efforts to destabilize Afghanistan and Iraq have aggravated the confrontation between the Iranian regime and the international community more than ever. While severe sanctions are imposed under the auspices of the United Nation's Security Council against the Islamic Republic, the possibility of a military strike to disable the political, defense and economic leadership of the regime is discussed openly between the proponents and opponents of such an option.

As the adversarial relationship between the Islamic regime and the international community becomes more antagonistic, the Iranian people are increasingly losing their voice and are deprived of their right of self determination. The Iranian people are treated as identical with the dictatorial regime which has, many would argue, taken them hostage for the past 28 years. They are now in danger of becoming the real losers of a conflict provoked by the regime's political and ideological agenda, which is being carried out without the people's consent and against their interest. The Iranian people would be the primary victims of a military action against the Islamic Republic.

Compared to other countries of the Middle East, the Iranian people have a high level of political maturity; an organized popular movement for democratic socio-political change in Iran has a history of more than 100 years. Despite the regime's claim of total social control, Iranian civil society seems to have thrived since the mid 1990s and has succeeded in reclaiming certain critical areas of social life. Some observers of Iran, particularly those with an insider's perspective, are convinced that the "problem" of the Islamic Republic can only be effectively solved in the interest of the international community if the initiative for a social and political change comes from within Iranian civil society.

In order to estimate the possibilities and limitations of Iranian civil society in bringing about social and political change, it is helpful to observe its effectiveness in a sensitive area, namely that of independent public information. The beginning of the internet era in Iran has given Iranian civil society the possibility to create and defend alternative spaces for intellectual and political discourse, outside the realm of the regime-controlled established media. This paper deals with the internet as the vehicle and instrument of the new, independent Iranian information society. It starts with a recapitulation of the recent spectacular development of Persian web logs. It then looks at the ambivalent function of the internet, on the one hand offering a virtual refuge for civil society and on the other hand serving as a target of the Islamic regime and its ideological followers to expand their authority and influence. Four case studies demonstrate how the internet has supported the grassroots democracy movement both within and outside of Iran and made the disconnected communication between civil society within the country and the Iranian diaspora in Western Europe and North America possible. The paper ends with observations about some cultural-linguistic and social implications of the web log phenomenon for the future of the Iranian society. It comes to the conclusion that the independent information society will – particularly by the use of media like web logs – indirectly and only in the long run lead to political changes in Iran.

## The Genesis of Blogs<sup>1</sup> as a Mass Phenomenon in Iran

An internet survey conducted by *Blogherald*<sup>2</sup> indicated recently that in October 2005, 700,000 Persian blogs were registered with various blog service providers. Out of this number, between 40,000 and 110,000 were active, i.e. they were updated regularly by their editors. At the same time, the total number of all blogs worldwide was estimated at 100 million. Beside Persian blogs, there are currently thousands of active English blogs, written and published by Iranians in the USA, Canada and in Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> In the beginning of the year 2006, the search engine *Technorati*<sup>4</sup> counted Persian among the 10 most popular languages for blogging in the entire world.<sup>5</sup> These figures are spectacularly high, considering that blogs as a Persian medium have only existed since mid-2001. Even general public access to the internet has a short story of less than ten years in Iran.<sup>6</sup>

The development of the internet in Iran dates back to the year 1989, when the *Institute of Theoretical Physics and Mathematics* (IPM)<sup>7</sup> was founded in Tehran under the directorship of Mohammad Javad Larijani,<sup>8</sup> one of the key figures of the conservative faction in the political leadership of the Islamic Republic. Among the initial members of research and teaching staff at IPM were younger scholars like Siavosh Shahshahani,<sup>9</sup> who were familiar with electronic communications like e-mail from the time of their university studies at European and North American academic institutions. They approached Larijani with the idea of creating e-mail facilities for IPM's academic exchange with its international counterparts. Preliminary talks were held between Larijani and the *Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics* (ICTP) in Trieste (Northern Italy) in 1989 about the connection of Iran to the BITNET of the *European Academic Research Network* (EARN). Iran's bid to join EARN was accepted conditionally: The Islamic Republic had to sign a written commitment to refrain from using EARN to spread religious propaganda and to promise NOT to obstruct data transfer between member states of EARN. The second condition was an indirect warning to the Islamic Republic against sabotaging data exchange between Iran and Israel. Larijani signed the agreement, including the specific conditions. Subsequently Iran's connection with EARN was created through a dial-up link with the computer network of the University of Vienna in Austria. Mohammad Javad Larijani has ever since been a mighty supporter of investing in the IT and internet infrastructure in the Islamic Republic. His thoughts and actions in support of technological innovation on one hand and his continuous justification of the most reactionary interpretations of Islam on the other hand seem contradictory.<sup>10</sup>

N.B. In the following, all Persian proper names and titles, which appear in English translation in the text body, will also be cited in the Persian alphabet in the footnotes.

<sup>1</sup> Blogs (contracted form of “weblog”) are digital internet diaries, in which entries appear in reverse chronological order. They are relatively simple instruments for editors (“bloggers”) to write and inform their audiences about aspects of their own life and to express their opinion about certain themes and topics. The first English blogs appeared on the internet in the mid-1990s and were initially called “online diaries.”

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: <http://www.blogherald.com/2005/10/10/the-blog-herald-blog-count-october-2005/>.

<sup>3</sup> For a complete and thematically structured list of English blogs by Iranians, see: <http://www.blogsbyiranians.com>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. <http://technorati.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf.: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/persian/2006/11/post\\_132.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/persian/2006/11/post_132.html).

<sup>6</sup> داستان ورود ایران به اینترنت گفتوگو با سیاوش شهشهانی. شماره 44 ماهنامه کامپیوتر و ارتباطات. خرداد

<sup>7</sup> .1385 IPM; See: <http://math.ipm.ac.ir>.

<sup>8</sup> محمد جواد لاریجانی

<sup>9</sup> سیاوش شهشهانی

<sup>10</sup> Larijani is one of the few aggressive public proponents of stonings as an appropriate form of punishment for

On 7 September 2001, an Iranian web developer named Salman Jariri<sup>11</sup> first published his manually coded Persian blog. He did not include any hyperlinks in his entries and did not allow comments underneath his blog.<sup>12</sup> On 25 September 2001, Hossein Derakhshan,<sup>13</sup> who at the time was working as an IT columnist in a reformist daily newspaper in Tehran, published his blog, which was also coded manually. On 5 November 2001, Derakhshan published his often quoted “guidelines” for the creation of Persian blogs on Google’s user-friendly website that allows the general public to set up weblogs, [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com).<sup>14</sup> Derakhshan’s instructions facilitated the development and later explosive growth of Persian blogs.

On 21 June 2002, the service [www.persianblog.com](http://www.persianblog.com) was inaugurated. The first public space allowing social encounters for bloggers outside the virtual world named “Café Blog” was opened on 22 September 2002 in the wealthy northern neighborhoods of Tehran.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, the total number of internet cafés, which also serve as social gathering venues for bloggers and their readers, is estimated at 1,500 in Tehran alone.

### Collective Blogs as a Grass Roots Exercise in Political Pluralism

Gradually, several groups of bloggers came together and founded collective blogs like *Cappuccino*,<sup>16</sup> whose content is developed in constant dialogue and cooperation between the various authors. The group blog *Hanouz*<sup>17</sup> was founded by a number of younger journalists like Ali Aghar Seyed-Abadi,<sup>18</sup> Arash Hassan-Nia,<sup>19</sup> Armen Norsessian<sup>20</sup> and Gissou Faghfouri,<sup>21</sup> who had lost their jobs as a result of massive newspaper bans and media restrictions imposed immediately after the beginning of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency in June 2005.

The popularity of individual blogs depends on how often they are updated and how much new material they have to offer. Many Iranian political bloggers are professional journalists, who have lost their access to the public media in the recent years. They have to earn a living with jobs other than professional journalism. This leaves them little time to update and keep a regular pool of readers attached to their blogs. The organization form of collective blogs offers a practical solution for this problem, as several editors can always keep a blog updated. This form of collaboration is also a valuable exercise in grass roots democracy, which for the first time in modern Iranian history has produced pluralistic media, in which authors can express a variety of views and opinions free from any “homogenizing” editorial scrutiny and censorship. The group

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adultery in today’s Iran, which, he insists, is in perfect accord with the unquestionable principles of Islam. (See, for instance, a video clip of an interview with Larijani, in which he defends a recent case of stoning in Takestan, in the province of Qazvin at: [http://www.radiozamaneh.org/movie/2007/07/post\\_37.html](http://www.radiozamaneh.org/movie/2007/07/post_37.html)).

<sup>11</sup> سلمان جریری

<sup>12</sup> Compare [http://shalakhteh.persianblog.com/1385\\_5\\_shalakhteh\\_archive.html#5471405](http://shalakhteh.persianblog.com/1385_5_shalakhteh_archive.html#5471405)

<sup>13</sup> حسین درخشان

<sup>14</sup> See: چگونه یک وبلاگ فارسی بسازیم: [http://i.hoder.com/archives/2001/11/011105\\_005346.shtml](http://i.hoder.com/archives/2001/11/011105_005346.shtml).

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.cafe-blog.com>

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://www.cappuccinomag.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.hanouz.com/>

<sup>18</sup> علی اصغر سید آبادی

<sup>19</sup> آرش حسن نیا

<sup>20</sup> آرمن نرسیان

<sup>21</sup> گیسو فغفوری

blog, *Realm of Malakut*,<sup>22</sup> was founded by several philosophically informed and aesthetically talented intellectuals, who mostly live abroad. Among them are Iranian cultural icons as the lexicographer, philosopher and translator of Nietzsche and Shakespeare Daryoush Ashouri<sup>23</sup> from Paris, the painter and sculptor Akram Abooyi<sup>24</sup> from Berlin, the musician and writer Amir Hossein Sam<sup>25</sup> from Oxford and the poet and documentary filmmaker Mehdi Jami,<sup>26</sup> who also founded this group blog.

## Media Restrictions as a Trigger for Independent Cyber Journalism

During Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), the judiciary remained under the control of the conservative faction, which used it as an instrument to "roll back" the reformist movement and impose restrictions on pro-reform media outlets. Younger professional journalists, who had lost their employment when their newspapers were closed, discovered "cyber journalism," through blogs, to offer an opportunity to continue writing without fear of persecution by the state, "internal" censorship by authoritarian and conformist chief editors or patronization by older colleagues. The number of older journalists who also "converted" to this new medium was minimal. Younes Shokrkhah<sup>27</sup> from the Tehran *School of Communicative Sciences*<sup>28</sup> was the first Iranian university teacher, who offered classes in cyber journalism in the academic year 2001/2. A number of future independent bloggers were Shokrkhah's former disciples, although he himself probably never intended to engage in any socio-political movement outside the Islamic Republic's government establishment.

Many young journalists who started their careers during Khatami's presidency and lost their jobs around 2000 left the country and found employment as cyber journalists in the newly established online editions of foreign media outlets like BBC radio's Persian service<sup>29</sup> and later Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Persian language *Radio Farda*.<sup>30</sup>

BBC started its Persian online service in 2001; its news webpage is updated every 15 minutes. With 1.25 million daily visitors, this service was the most popular source of political and social information in Persian on the internet until it was blocked in Iran by the Islamic Republic's

<sup>22</sup> داریوش آشوری؛ [حلقه ملکوت](http://www.malakut.org)؛ Cf.: <http://www.malakut.org>.

<sup>23</sup> اکرم ابویی

<sup>24</sup> امیر حسین سام

<sup>25</sup> مهدی جامی

<sup>27</sup> بیونس شکرخواه؛ Cf.: <http://www.shokrkhah.com>.

<sup>28</sup> دانشگاه علامه طباطبائی؛ Born in Mashhad in 1957, Shokrkhah studied at the *Allame Tabatabai University* in Tehran. In 1981, he was a core member of a group of the Iranian Republic's conformist journalists, who took over all key positions in all established newspapers in Tehran after these were violently "cleansed" of ideologically suspect staff members. Shokrkhah started his career on the editorial board of Keyhan daily newspaper and was for 16 years responsible for its "international section." At the same time, he worked for numerous other newspapers and magazines as well, including Ketab-e Hafte همشهری کتاب هفته and Hamshahri همشهری خامشاهري. In the early stages of the internet boom in Iran, he created Jam-e Jam Online and Hamshahri Online under the license of the official state radio and television organization صدا و سیما and the office of the mayor of Tehran. More than ten authored and edited books as well as dozens of translated volumes by Shokrkhah belong to the standard reading material used for the professional training of journalists in the Iranian Republic. Cf.: <http://younesspace.blogspot.com/2004/05/1.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Cf.: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian>.

<sup>30</sup> Cf.: <http://www.radiofarda.org>.

internet censors in January 2007. For its extensive online service, BBC hired between 25 and 30 journalists directly from Iran through job interviews that were partly held in Iran's neighboring country Turkey. The new employees were mostly younger journalists who knew BBC's target audience inside the country from first hand experience. *Radio Farda*'s Persian service was founded in November 2006 according to a similar concept as BBC Persian, mainly with the help of recently emigrated young journalists from inside Iran.<sup>31</sup>

### The Discovery of Blogs by Populist Politicians

While spreading rapidly across Iranian society, blogs started reaching the highest levels of the Islamic Republic's government officials, as well. On 24 November 2002, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Khatami's vice-president for legal and parliamentary affairs, started his own blog.<sup>32</sup> In an exclusive article for BBC's Persian service,<sup>33</sup> Abtahi wrote that before becoming a blogger himself, he spent many hours reading blogs by young Iranians. He found them more insightful than the daily confidential information bulletins about the state of Iranian society prepared for cabinet members by the country's intelligence organizations. According to Abtahi, blogs show directly what is going on in the heads of the younger generation and are indispensable sources for politicians who are concerned about this generation.<sup>34</sup> On 16 January 2004, a number of reformist members of parliament created a blog and used it to inform the general public about their action, thereby emulating the methods of the opposition outside the regime's establishment.

In the fall of 2005, a few months after Mohammad Khatami had stepped down as president, the editors of the journal *Chehel Cheragh*<sup>35</sup> created a website and a blog for him with the name, "The man with the chocolate colored robe."<sup>36</sup> During a public event at the *Bahman* cultural centre in southern Tehran, they gave Khatami the login and password to his blog and expressed hope that he would join the online community as soon as possible. Khatami's first blog entry received comments from 400 readers. Several of them expressed the wish that Khatami would take the opportunity and discuss the "untold"<sup>37</sup> stories of his presidency, i.e., explain why the reformist project failed after eight years. Khatami never did so and soon afterwards lost interest in his blog.

<sup>31</sup> The head of *Radio Farda*'s online service is Jamshid Barzegar. Before his departure from Iran in 2001, he was the editor in chief of *Hambastegi همسنگی* daily newspaper. Because of his membership in the executive board of the *Iranian Writers' Association*, کانون نویسندهای ایران, Barzegar was forced to resign from his job. Like many other younger journalists with academic aspirations and solid knowledge of several foreign languages, he managed to leave the country to study abroad, in his case as a PhD student in political science in Vienna. From there, he started working for BBC Persian's online service and since the summer of 2006 for *Radio Farda*. (Interview with Jamshid Barzegar on Friday 10 August 2007).

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.webneveshteha.com/>.

<sup>33</sup> Cf.: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/041107\\_mj-iran-web-log-anniv.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/041107_mj-iran-web-log-anniv.shtml).

<sup>34</sup> See also: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4315455.stm>.

<sup>35</sup> چراغ 40

<sup>36</sup> مردی با عبای شکلاتی

<sup>37</sup> ناگفته‌ها

## The Conservatives' Attempt to Take Possession of the New Medium

After some prominent and high ranking reformists had discovered the new medium for themselves, it also caught the attention of the “traditional conservatives.”<sup>38</sup> With the beginning of Mahmoud Ahmdinejad’s presidency in June 2005, conservative regime conformist blogs started to boom. On 14 August 2007, President Ahmadinejad himself started his blog with a long entry.<sup>39</sup> His blog continues to be published in Persian, English, French and Arabic.

In June 2007, the first “festival of revolutionary blogs and websites” took place in Tehran under the official patronage of the *Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance* (“Ershad”).<sup>40</sup> In his keynote speech at this festival, the Ershad minister, Mohammad Hossein Saffar Harandi,<sup>41</sup> put forward a number of theses that indicate the new direction of the Islamic Republic’s internet and new media policy. He announced that title of his vice-minister for “press affairs”<sup>42</sup> would be changed to “media affairs,”<sup>43</sup> specifically to include the internet and blogs. In the future, blogs and the internet would be regarded as greater priorities than the “traditional press.” His ministry would actively sponsor the development and expansion of blogs that “propagate the values of the Islamic Revolution” and help them to “increase the cultural authority of the Islamic Republic in the virtual sphere.”

These statements clearly show that even the most conservative fundamentalists at the top of the Islamic Republic’s leadership pyramid like Saffar Harandi cannot be declared as “enemies of the internet” in an undifferentiated manner. They are “friends” of the internet but would like to use it for their own agenda, whether it is to gather intelligence from open media or to spread their own manipulation and propaganda.

## The Conservative Campaign for Ideological Homogenization of Media

Shortly after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s election as president in June 2005, there were clear indications of a conservative campaign for a stronger ideological homogenization of media and centralization of state power. During the first two years of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, more than 100 newspapers and other periodicals were banned. On 9 July 2007, one day after a meeting between the “Minister of Islamic Guidance,” Saffar Harandi, as well as license holders and editors in chief of newspapers and new agencies, an anonymous editorial was published in the conformist newspaper, *Iran*, in which the few remaining critical press organs were accused of interpreting “the reservedness and modesty of the government” as signs of weakness and turning themselves into “conspiratorial, hostile pamphlets.”<sup>44</sup> Anonymous editorials in *Iran* usually reflect the views of the government. Shortly before the publication of this editorial, the daily newspaper *Ham Mihan*<sup>45</sup> had been banned, the license of the reformist outlet *Mosharekat*<sup>46</sup>

<sup>38</sup> محافظه کاران سنتی

<sup>39</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4790005.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4790005.stm) ; See Ahmadinejad’s Blog at: <http://www.ahmadinejad.ir>.

<sup>40</sup> وزیر فرهنگ و ارشاد اسلامی

<sup>41</sup> محمد حسین صفار هرندي; An Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general and former political prison interrogator, he held key positions on the editorial boards of *Keyhan* daily and *Kayhan-e Havayi* between 1994 and 2005. Compare: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8411260563>.

<sup>42</sup> معاونت مطبوعاتی

<sup>43</sup> معاونت رسانه ای

<sup>44</sup> شبکه علیه دولت

<sup>45</sup> هم میهن

annulled and the director of the Iran Labor News Agency (ILNA)<sup>47</sup> forced to resign. The editorial explicitly reminded the critical press of the fate of more than 300 newspapers and journals banned since 1997 upon direct orders of the “supreme leader” of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khameni, and warned them about the “grave consequences of their attitude.”

The Islamic press community is generally controlled by three factions within the regime. There are the “traditional conservatives,” the “government internal (religious) reformists”<sup>48</sup> (who were rapidly removed from key positions after Ahmadinejad came to power) and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s *Kargozaran Party*.<sup>49</sup> Newspapers and journals sympathizing with the religious reformist movement have been under constant pressure through a variety of mechanisms, including the selective awarding of licenses, arbitrary bans, arrest of journalists and license holders and blocking of their websites.

According to the reformist activist Mohammad Javad Haqshenas,<sup>50</sup> only 3 % of all press outlets are under the control of the critics of the government, whereas 70 % are run by active supporters of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The above-mentioned editorial in *Iran* is actually addressed to this 3 % minority within the otherwise domesticated and homogenized press community. The aggressive tone of this editorial is a reaction to the increasing pressure that the current leadership of the Islamic Republic is sensing from economic embargo and diplomatic isolation from outside the country.

### **The Systematic Expansion of the State’s Media Control of the Internet**

According to official figures published by the Iranian *Ministry of Communication and Information Technology*,<sup>51</sup> the total number of internet users in 2001 was estimated at 1 million. This number increased to 5 million in 2005, 11 million in 2007 and by 2009, 25 million users are expected. At present, there are 650 Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and 150 Internet Content Providers (ICPs) active in Iran. A company named *Data Corporation*<sup>52</sup> is currently the biggest ISP in Iran and the main link to the state telecommunications authority. Most other ISPs receive their access to the internet through *Data Corporation* and are subject to restrictions imposed upon them by the government through this company.

Since the internet and related technologies have come to the Islamic Republic, the government has issued preliminary regulations for the activity of ISPs.<sup>53</sup> According to these regulations, all private ISPs must be in possession of filtering facilities to block specific websites included in the government’s “black lists,” which contain millions of addresses. Since mid-2006, the leadership of the Islamic Republic seems to have centralized the filtering practice in order to selectively block certain websites. The government’s “black lists” are compiled and updated by the *Supreme Council for Communication Affairs*.<sup>54</sup> The *Committee for the Determination of the Applicability*

<sup>46</sup> مشارکت

<sup>47</sup> Iran Labor News Agency خبرگزاری کار ایران

<sup>48</sup> اصلاح طلبان حکومتی

<sup>49</sup> حزب کارگزاران سازندگی

<sup>50</sup> محمد جواد حق شناس

<sup>51</sup> وزارت ارتباطات و فن اوری اطلاعات

<sup>52</sup> شرکت ارتباطات دینا

<sup>53</sup> مقررات و ضوابط شبکه های اطلاع رسانه ای رایانه ای

<sup>54</sup> شورای عالی اطلاع رسانی

of Filtering,<sup>55</sup> composed of three members representing the state radio and television organization,<sup>56</sup> the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)<sup>57</sup> and the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution<sup>58</sup> is the country's central executive organ steering internet filtering policies. Interestingly, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology has no representative in this committee.

The centralization process seems to be constantly undermined on all levels by the Islamic Republic's own government organs. From time to time, the Judiciary, which is not represented in the "filtering committee" either, gets involved directly and issues instructions and prohibitions to ISPs. Likewise, the filtering committee's policies seem to be enforced with various degrees of strictness in different parts of the country. In the southern and south-eastern border regions,<sup>59</sup> which were destabilized by ethnic and religious conflicts during the past years, filtering and blocking of unapproved websites is enforced more strictly. Occasionally, the internet connection of entire provinces has been switched off. On the other hand, users can often access blocked websites during the night or from specific locations like university computer centers and newspaper editorial offices.<sup>60</sup>

So far, the "filtering committee" has never justified its decisions to block certain internet sites. The only explicitly formulated filtering rule is rather vague and was issued by the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution. It requires the ban of "heretic publications that contradict the principles of Islam and insult its holiness and advertise for forbidden political groups and parties."<sup>61</sup>

In mid-July 2005, a bill about "computer crimes"<sup>62</sup> was agreed upon and sent on to the 7<sup>th</sup> parliament of the Islamic Republic for approval by the newly constituted cabinet of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The bill claimed to target "economic crimes"<sup>63</sup> committed with computers as well as pornography and hacker activities, but in reality it was solely applied to "political offenses." At about this time, the popular websites Flickr, YouTube, Wikipedia und the *New York Times* were banned and the maximum speed of broadband internet connections was limited by law to 128 kilobytes per second (KBps), in order to prevent uploads and downloads of large audio and video files over the internet.

### **Internet Filtering as a Tool in the Islamic Republic's Internal Rivalries**

Internet filtering, website blocking and even the surveillance of the mobile telephone network are not just weapons against oppositional activity outside the regime. Occasionally they are also used as instruments in the power struggle between rival factions in the conservative camp in the leadership of the Islamic Republic. In February 2007, as well as earlier during 2006, the website

<sup>55</sup> کمیته تعیین مصادیق فیلترینگ

<sup>56</sup> صدا و سیمای جمهوری اسلامی ایران

<sup>57</sup> وزارت اطلاعات و امنیت جمهوری اسلامی

<sup>58</sup> شورای عالی انقلاب فرهنگی

<sup>59</sup> خوزستان و سیستان و بلوچستان and Khuzestan and Sistan and Baluchestan.

<sup>60</sup> This information is based on an interview on Tuesday 14 August with the exiled cyber-journalist Ebrahim Nabavi (Brussels) about reader response surveys he conducted about his own blog and various websites.

<sup>61</sup> مطالب کفر آمیز و مخالف موازین اسلامی، اهانت به دین اسلام و مقدسات آن، اشاعه و تبلیغ گروهها و احزاب غیر قانونی.

<sup>62</sup> لایحه جرایم رایانه ای

<sup>63</sup> جرایم اقتصادی

*Baztab*<sup>64</sup> was temporarily blocked for readers inside Iran. The license owner and general editor of *Baztab* is Mohsen Rezai,<sup>65</sup> a member of the Islamic Republic's *Expediency Council*<sup>66</sup> and a veteran of the security and intelligence network since the early 1980s, notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the MOIS.<sup>67</sup> *Baztab* was blocked because it published articles that criticized the work of the nuclear negotiation team of the Islamic Republic, at that time lead by the cleric Hassan Rohani.

The mobile telephone network has been subject to surveillance many times since the fall of 2005 specifically before and during national or regional elections. In an interview<sup>68</sup> with the Iranian *Science and Information Technology News Agency* (SITNA)<sup>69</sup> on 22 June 2007, Vafa Ghaffarian<sup>70</sup> from the telecommunication authority announced that his organization would even "reward mobile phone users who came forward with information leading to the identification of individuals disseminating 'immoral' MMS"<sup>71</sup> through the mobile phone network." This open invitation to paid denunciation is related to a directive issued by the *Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution* to the telecommunication authority to purchase the necessary equipment in order to "extend communication surveillance to the mobile phone network, prevent the 'abuse' of SMS<sup>72</sup> and MMS facilities and combat the 'social problems' resulting from this abuse." Ghaffarian added that his organization would introduce random content checks and "limit" text messaging facilities before political elections, in order to prevent "negative propaganda against certain candidates."

This was an allusion to a controversy which arose before the presidential election in June 2005 and the elections of the *Islamic City and Village Councils*<sup>73</sup> in the fall of that same year. At that time, one of Ahmadinejad's close associates named Mehrdad Pazrash<sup>74</sup> claimed to have uncovered "a destructive campaign" against Ahmadinejad, carried out by the "son of his competitor" (most probably Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani<sup>75</sup>), using 20 government-owned mobile phones.

### **Remarks about *Smart Filter* and *Secure Computing***

According to Reza Parsa, president of the Iranian ISP Association, the telecommunication authority uses the program *Smart Filter* by the American company *Secure Computing* in order to filter the Internet within Iran, because filtering software from domestic production has not yet reached the quality level of "intelligent" foreign filtering programs. Meanwhile, *Secure*

<sup>64</sup> بازتاب; Cf.: [www.baztab.ir](http://www.baztab.ir).

<sup>65</sup> محسن رضایی ; See his personal website at: <http://rezaee.ir>.

<sup>66</sup> مجتمع تشخیص مصلحت نظام; in English: "Expediency Council". Cf.: <http://www.majma.ir>.

<sup>67</sup> [http://www.radiofarda.com/Article/2007/02/20/f5\\_filter\\_isp\\_iran.html](http://www.radiofarda.com/Article/2007/02/20/f5_filter_isp_iran.html).

<sup>68</sup> Compare <http://www.radiofarda.org/Article/2007/06/23/f3-MMS.html>.

<sup>69</sup> خبرگزاری علوم و فن آوری اطلاعات; Cf.: [www.sitna.ir](http://www.sitna.ir).

<sup>70</sup> وفا غفاریان

<sup>71</sup> Multimedia Messaging Service.

<sup>72</sup> Short Messaging Service.

<sup>73</sup> شوراهای اسلامی شهر و روستا

<sup>74</sup> مهرداد بذرپاش

<sup>75</sup> علی اکبر هاشمی رفسنجانی

*Computing* has denied any business relations with the Islamic Republic.<sup>76</sup> The illegal use of *Smart Filter* constitutes an act of international copyright infringement. If Iran joins the *World Trade Organization* (WTO) in the future, the regime will have to pay a high fine for this kind of piracy. According to *Secure Computing*, the Islamic Republic's "moral guardians" are using a pirated beta version of *Smart Filter*. This explains a series of filtering mistakes and "misunderstandings," like the temporary blocking of Grand Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani's website. It should be added that *Smart Filter* only targets HTTP protocols, therefore it does not affect internet services like e-mail, FTP and chat.

### **International Campaigns against Internet Censorship in Iran**

In October 2005, the organization "Reporters sans Frontières"<sup>77</sup> declared the Islamic Republic to be one of the world's 15 greatest enemies of the internet.<sup>78</sup> On 18 December 2006, the London-based human rights organization ARTICLE 19 started an interactive campaign with the title, *The Persian Impediment*,<sup>79</sup> against internet censorship in Iran. In the publications of this campaign, the organizational structures of internet censorship in the Islamic Republic and the regime's repressive measures against bloggers are disclosed and criticized.

A research report published on 18 May 2007 by the OpenNet Initiative<sup>80</sup> of Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Toronto universities investigated internet regulation in 40 countries, including the Palestinian Authority. This report identifies the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic as the world's biggest internet censors. In 25 out of the 40 investigated countries, websites are blocked. Iran, China, Myanmar, Syria, Tunisia and Vietnam censor political internet sites on a large scale. As is the case in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, Iran is one of the countries that censor radically internet pages with sexual content.<sup>81</sup> From 1477 websites chosen by the *OpenNet Initiative* for this investigation, 499 (i.e., more than 30 %) were blocked in Iran. Most of these pages are in the Persian language. The report also indicates that 50 % of all Persian and only 5 % of English political websites are blocked inside Iran. And finally, an average of 95 % of all proxy server and anonymizer services was banned.

### **The Judiciary against Bloggers**

Even before blogs turned into a mass phenomenon in Iranian society, the judiciary started repressive measures to intimidate bloggers who are critical of the government. Blogs are increasingly used, for instance, as a mobilization instrument for protests against the arrest of dissidents. An early example for this was a campaign initiated by Reza Shokrollahi through his blog *Khabgard*<sup>82</sup> against the incarceration of a fellow writer named Yaghoub Yadali.<sup>83</sup> The first

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.ox.ac.uk/research/category.cfm?id=4>; see also: <http://sethf.com/infothought/blog/archives/000875.html>.

<sup>77</sup> CF.: <http://www.rsf.org>.

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/11/28/wblog28.xml>.

<sup>79</sup> See: <http://www.persianimpediment.org>.

<sup>80</sup> See: <http://opennet.net>.

<sup>81</sup> [http://www.radiofarda.com/Article/2007/05/19/o2\\_block\\_web.html](http://www.radiofarda.com/Article/2007/05/19/o2_block_web.html).

<sup>82</sup> خوابگرد; See: <http://www.khabgard.com>.

prominent case of a blogger's arrest that found broad media coverage was that of Sina Motallebi.<sup>84</sup> In 2001, Motallebi was working as a film critic and cultural columnist for a Tehran reformist daily newspaper. At the same time, he wrote his own blog named *Rooz Negar*. Because of an entry about the imprisoned writer and activist Akbar Ganji, Motallebi was arrested and interrogated in the fall of 2001. In the following 18 months, he was summoned four more times by the judiciary and in April 2003 he was arrested and put in prison. He remained 22 days in solitary confinement and was subject to psychological torture. He was only released after his family came up with the bail sum of \$60,000. Upon his release, he immediately fled the country and joined his wife in the Netherlands, where she had been running a blog campaign for his release. Today he lives in London and is working for the online section of BBC's Persian service.<sup>85</sup>

In prison, the access data for *Rooz Negar* was pressed out of Motallebi and used by MOIS agents to highjack *ROOZ NEGAR*, writing misleading entries in the blog and forging his name. As soon as it became generally known that Sina Motallebi had fled the country, his father, Said Motallebi, an apolitical lawyer and filmmaker, was arrested. Said Motallebi's kidnapping and the blackmailing of Sina led to a protest movement in and outside the country against the judiciary and the "reformist" President Khatami. Khatami remained silent to avoid an open confrontation with the conservative dominated judiciary and thereby discredited himself in the eyes of his own supporters.<sup>86</sup>

One effective tactic used by the judiciary is to set extremely high bail sums for imprisoned bloggers. Since their families are unable to come up with the money, the bloggers remain in prison and often have to serve their entire sentence, which removes them from the public sphere as intended by the judiciary. The bloggers Arash Sigarchi<sup>87</sup> and Mojtaba Samiinejad,<sup>88</sup> for instance, were arrested in January and November 2005 respectively. According to the New York-based organization "Human Rights Watch,"<sup>89</sup> Samiinejad was held for 88 days in solitary confinement and tortured. Samiinejad had written in his blog about the arrest and kidnapping of three fellow bloggers. He was first apprehended on 27 January and released but then arrested again on 12 February and put on trial on charges of "insulting the prophet, the prophet's successors and the holiness of Islam." He remained in the Karaj prison until 13 September 2006. The bail for his release had been set by the court at \$125,000, a sum that his family was unable to pay. Sigarchi was arrested and tried in his home town Rasht<sup>90</sup> on similar charges. Initially he was sentenced to 14 years in prison and his bail set at \$200,000. An appeals court reduced the sentence to three years, which he will have to serve in its entirety.

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<sup>83</sup> بعقوب یدالی

<sup>84</sup> سینا مطلبی

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Sina Motallebi on August 8, 2007.

<sup>86</sup> See the unusually harsh tone in an open letter by the prominent Khatami supporter Ebrahim Nabavi: آقای خاتمی! in: فضیلت جرم است، پدر بودن که جرم نیست <http://news.gooya.com/nabavi/archives/015971.php>.

<sup>87</sup> آرش سیگارچی

<sup>88</sup> مجتبی سمیعی نژاد

<sup>89</sup> Compare: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.htm?tbl=RSDCOI&page=research&id=43cfaea120>.

<sup>90</sup> رشت

## Resistance against Forced Blog Registration

On 5 January 2007, the prosecutor Said Mortazavi ordered all Iranian ISPs to block a number of blog service providers. Later, in June, all Iranian bloggers were ordered to register their blogs through a virtual government office.<sup>91</sup> In the registration process, bloggers who write under a pseudonym have to disclose their real identity and all access data for their blogs. Individuals who do not comply with these orders must expect their blogs to be filtered and blocked for readers in and perhaps outside of the country. The government can indeed order Iran-based services like [www.persian.com](http://www.persian.com) to filter unregistered blogs. At present, there are 780,000 blogs registered with PersianBlog, 10 % of which are updated daily.<sup>92</sup> The judiciary's registration directive triggered a wide civil resistance action by non-conformist bloggers. Even some bloggers who publish under their own names and live inside the country participated in the resistance. The journalist and women's movement activist, Parastoo Dokouhaki, for example, published a banner in her blog<sup>93</sup> announcing that she would boycott the registration.

## State Security Organizations against Secular Intellectuals

In May 2007, the Tehran daily newspaper Kayhan started a defamatory article series against a number of well-known intellectuals, artists and film makers, who mostly reside and work in Iran. In these articles, a strange mix of people including the filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami,<sup>94</sup> the photographer Mariam Zandi,<sup>95</sup> the graphic artist Ebrahim Haqqi,<sup>96</sup> the editor Ali Dehbashi,<sup>97</sup> the director of the Tehran *House of Artists*<sup>98</sup> Behrooz Gharibpoor,<sup>99</sup> the former director of the *Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art* Alireza Sami'-Azar<sup>100</sup> and others were accused of secretly preparing a “velvet revolution” in order to “softly overthrow” the Islamic Republic.

In Iranian intellectual circles, these attacks are perceived as reminiscent of similar “warning signs” issued by Kayhan prior to the “serial murders”<sup>101</sup> of the 1990s. In the course of the “serial murders,” the writers Mohammad Mokhtari<sup>102</sup> and Mohammad Jafar Pooyande<sup>103</sup> and the political activists Dariush Forouhar,<sup>104</sup> Parvaneh Eskandari<sup>105</sup> and Pirooz Davani,<sup>106</sup> among others, were murdered by MOIS operatives. The serial murders of 1997 were also initiated by a defamatory article series in Keyhan daily.

<sup>91</sup> [www.samandehi.ir](http://www.samandehi.ir).

<sup>92</sup> Compare: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2007/jun/07/newmedia.iran>.

<sup>93</sup> Compare: زن نوشت – پاداشتهای پرستو دوکوهکی <http://weblog.parastood.ir>.

<sup>94</sup> عباس کیارستمی

<sup>95</sup> مریم زندی

<sup>96</sup> ابراهیم حقیقی

<sup>97</sup> علی دهباشی

<sup>98</sup> خانه هنرمندان

<sup>99</sup> بهروز غریب پور

<sup>100</sup> علیرضا سمیع آذر

<sup>101</sup> قتلهای زنجیره ای

<sup>102</sup> محمد مختاری

<sup>103</sup> محمد جعفر پوینده

<sup>104</sup> داریوش فروهر

<sup>105</sup> پروانه اسکندری

<sup>106</sup> پیروز دوانی

In the new Keyhan series of articles, any “advertisement for secularism,” even translations of foreign books and articles that introduce western critical social theories in Iranian intellectual debates, are qualified as “espionage activity on behalf of the enemies of the Islamic Republic.” Keyhan published a peculiar list of the “centers of the hostile cultural offensive” against the Islamic Republic. The list includes a variety of professional organizations, academic associations and political parties as the centers of “conspiracy,” including the *House of Artists*, the *Sociological Association*,<sup>107</sup> the *Freedom Movement*<sup>108</sup> and the *Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution*,<sup>109</sup> the latter having held top government positions until June 2005.

The series of articles is indicative of new aggressive efforts by the ruling military and intelligence faction to impose even more political and cultural restrictions upon Iranian society. Members of this faction have been occupying most important key positions of power in the Islamic Republic since the beginning of Ahmadinejad’s presidency and are, as always, using *Keyhan* as their mouthpiece.

Between January and June 2007, four American citizens of Iranian descent were apprehended one after another by the MOIS: Hale Esfandiari,<sup>110</sup> director of the Middle East program in the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington D.C., Kian Tajbakhsh,<sup>111</sup> social scientist and internationally renowned expert in urban planning and public health, Ali Shakeri,<sup>112</sup> Californian real estate developer and member of the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the University of California in Irvine and Parnaz Azima,<sup>113</sup> editor and producer in the US-funded RFE/RL’s Persian program *Radio Farda*. All four individuals were accused of working under the direction of US intelligence agencies and with the financial support of organizations like *Soros Fund Management* and Georg Soros’ *Open Society Institute* in preparation of a “soft overthrow” of the Islamic Republic, according to Eastern European models. These accusations were vehemently refuted even by people close to certain centers of power in the Islamic Republic like the Tehran University professor Sadeq Ziba Kalam,<sup>114</sup> a former member of the *Council for the Cultural Revolution* and associate of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Furthermore, the penal code of the Islamic Republic does not include any definition for a political crime called “conspiracy for a soft overthrow of the government” (yet!).

After being kept in solitary confinement for 100 days, Hale Esfandiari was released from Evin prison with a bail of \$300,000 and was able to leave Iran on 2 September 2007. She had to agree to appear in a television interview, in which she confirmed the accusations of the MOIS against herself. Her case shows that the Islamic Republic’s intelligence apparatus is sabotaging existing academic exchange relations between US and Iranian universities by scaring off academics in US universities from contacts with Iranian civil society and Iranian academics within the country.<sup>115</sup>

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107 انجمن جامعه شناسی ایران

108 نهضت آزادی ایران

109 سازمان مجاهدین انقلاب اسلامی

110 هاله اسفندياري

111 کيان تاجبخش

112 على شاكرى

113 پرناز عظيمها

114 صادق زيبا کلام

115 During the summer 2007, the US-based *International Society for Iranian Studies* (ISIS) and other academic organizations concerned with the Middle East and Iran issued internal warnings to their members against travelling to the Iranian Republic.

## Qom, the Computer Capitol of the Islamic Republic<sup>116</sup>

The city of Qom is the center of the most important religious educational institution<sup>117</sup> of the Twelver Shiite clergy known as the *Howze*. In the beginning of his term as supreme religious leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei<sup>118</sup> commissioned a working group of younger seminarians, who already had advanced university degrees,<sup>119</sup> to set the foundation for the *Computer Centre for Religious Sciences* in Qom.<sup>120</sup> Among these seminarians was one Taha Hashemi,<sup>121</sup> who had studied medicine prior to coming to Qom. All members of this group had close affinities with the conservative faction within the leadership of the Islamic Republic centered around Ayatollah Khamenei. The directors of the new computer center made it a priority to persuade older Mullahs of the benefits of computers. The lecturers of the *Howze* and the most senior religious authorities<sup>122</sup> were offered computers and IT services at discounted prices. At first, this computer center had two departments for hardware and software that were later split into two separate institutions. All seminarians were also given the opportunity to pay for their computer equipment in installments and attend free computer classes.

### The Creation of a “Digital Memory” in the *Howze*

The “computer center hired a large number of seminarians to electronically save and computerize all key texts of “traditional theology,”<sup>123</sup> from Islamic law (“Fiqh”) to philosophy. This data was later put on CD-ROMs with sophisticated programs and published. Henceforth, all key texts of *Hadith*<sup>124</sup> and *Elm-el-Rejal*,<sup>125</sup> which constitute the essential working material of religious scholars, were published in CD-ROM format, thereby simplifying theme and keyword searches within texts. Gradually, older, conservative clerics were able to overcome their initial skepticism about computers. During the first half of the 1990s, most offices of the *Howze* were computerized; among the Twelver Shiite clerics of Iran, the computer became a sign of modernity. IT literacy became a symbolic value in the (cultural) race to catch up with the modern world. Everything, from theological and didactic contents to the bureaucratic management of the *Howze* and of course the inquisitorial surveillance of clerics by the judiciary, was rationalized with information technology. Many senior clerics, like Seyed Javad Shahrestani,<sup>126</sup> son-in-law and “religious attorney”<sup>127</sup> of the Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani<sup>128</sup> in Qom, gave

<sup>116</sup> All information in the section about Qom is based on the following insightful interviews and articles by Mehdi Khalaji: مهدی خلاجی: [http://www.radiozamaaneh.com/special/2007/04/post\\_188.html](http://www.radiozamaaneh.com/special/2007/04/post_188.html); [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/08/050802\\_mj-shahr-e-khoda-main.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/08/printable/050802_mj-shahr-e-khoda-main.shtml) and particularly: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/08/050802\\_mj-mkhalaifi-internet-qom.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/08/050802_mj-mkhalaifi-internet-qom.shtml); See also: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=33>.

<sup>117</sup> حوزه علمیه قم

<sup>118</sup> ولی فقیه

<sup>119</sup> طلبہ

<sup>120</sup> مرکز تحقیقات کامپیوٹری علوم اسلامی

<sup>121</sup> طه هاشمی

<sup>122</sup> مراجع تقلید

<sup>123</sup> متون علوم سنتی

<sup>124</sup> حدیث; Reports about Sayings and deeds of the prophet of Islam.

<sup>125</sup> علم رجال، راویان حدیث; Reports about the narrators of these sayings.

<sup>126</sup> سید جواد شہرستانی

<sup>127</sup> وکیل شرعی

<sup>128</sup> علی سیستانی

computers as presents to their students and encouraged them to familiarize themselves with the internet.

### Shiite Religious Authorities Discover the Internet

During the second half of the 1990s, several other companies and institutions besides the aforementioned *Computer Research Centre for Islamic Sciences* were founded in Qom, offering IT and internet services. Before the dawn of the internet in Qom, Shiite clerics thought that they only lacked the appropriate instruments for the propaganda and dissemination of Islam.<sup>129</sup> They considered their own interpretation of Islam and their traditional cognitive framework as immaculate and perfectly accurate. With this worldview, they “discovered” the internet as an appropriate vehicle to disseminate “theological sciences”<sup>130</sup> beyond the limits of the *Howze* in Qom. Right at the beginning of the Iranian internet boom at the turn of the millennium, most powerful Twelver Shiite religious authorities created their own websites. Among them were the ayatollahs Ali Sistani,<sup>131</sup> Sheikh Javad Tabrizi,<sup>132</sup> Ali Sanei,<sup>133</sup> Hossein Nouri Hemadani<sup>134</sup> and even ultra-conservative elements like Lotfollah Safi Golpaigani.<sup>135</sup> Most of these websites are at least trilingual. The website of the late Mohammad Fazel Lankarani<sup>136</sup> is in 29 languages.

The website of a “Marja”<sup>137</sup> is his virtual “Beyt,”<sup>138</sup> through which his “adherents”<sup>139</sup> learn about his latest decrees.<sup>140</sup> They can access his theological dissertation<sup>141</sup> and some personal informational about him. They can specifically find out how they can donate money<sup>142</sup> to the cleric. There is a latent competition between the highest religious authorities for the recruitment of “imitators” because high numbers of imitators translate directly into more income from endowments. The biographical sections of many virtual “beyts” often contain mystified versions of a marja’s life and occasionally even implied allusions to his supernatural healing powers.<sup>143</sup> Some websites contain extensive narratives about non-profit initiatives (for example, the building of schools and libraries) under the auspices of an authority as an indirect incentive to the “imitators” for more monetary donations.

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129 تبلیغ

130 معارف و علوم سنتی

131 علی سیستانی <http://www.sistani.org/>.

132 شیخ جواد تبریزی <http://www.tabrizi.org/>.

133 صانعی <http://www.saanei.org/>.

134 حسین نوری همدانی <http://www.noorihamedani.com>.

135 لطف الله صافی گلپایگانی <http://www.saafi.net/>.

136 شیخ محمد فاضل لنکرانی <http://www.lankarani.net/>.

137 مرجع تقليد Senior religious authority

138 Literally: home, here: headquarters.

139 مقادین

140 فتاوا، فتاوى

141 توضیح المسائل

142 وجوه شرعی

143 کرامات و خوارق

## Religious Propaganda and Match Making Agencies through “Web 2.0”

Apart from those senior religious authorities, some mullahs of medium and lower ranks also host rather sophisticated websites. The most interesting websites in this category are the ones by Hossein Ansarian<sup>144</sup> and the veteran TV preacher Mohsen Qara’ati,<sup>145</sup> as they are published in seven languages and offer text, audio and video documents, using all available technical potentials of “web 2.0”. Some mullahs like Savlanpur Ardebili<sup>146</sup> use their sites as virtual matchmaking agencies.<sup>147</sup> A large number of websites run by junior level mullahs offer services for the temporary marriage “*Sighe*. ”<sup>148</sup>

## The Increasing Popularity of Religious Blogs

On 11 October 2005, the first public introductory course about blogging was offered in the city of Qom under the auspices of the recently founded *Office for the Promotion of Religious Blogs*.<sup>149</sup> Some younger seminarians and mullahs had already started to publish blogs back in 2001. These religious blogs usually contain almost no personal information about the authors. Najaf Lakzayi,<sup>150</sup> for example, exclusively publishes specialized texts directly related to his job as director of the *Research Centre for the Islamic State* in Qom.<sup>151</sup> It is relatively difficult to find any specific information about the daily life and work of clerics and seminarians in religious blogs. Compared to “normal” civilian blogs, personal information can only sporadically be found between the lines of religious blog entries.

The language of religious websites usually follows archaic rhetorical rules, which make them rather inaccessible for younger, non-religious readers. Religious blogs, on the other hand, tend to a more informal style. Religious blogs by conservative and conformist writers are more numerous than those by reform-theologians and their sympathizers among seminarians. Blogs by reform-theologians are often published under pseudonyms, in obvious fear of possible persecution by the regime. Conservative bloggers, however, write under their own names. During the eight-year presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) most blogs and websites run by seminarians and mullahs from Qom were in clear opposition to the president and his reformist political agenda.

## Reform-Theologians on the Internet

For a small number of “dissident” reform theologians who live in the Islamic Republic, websites are the only possible conduit to publish their writings: Mohsen Kadivar<sup>152</sup> publishes his most

<sup>144</sup> حسین انصاریان; <http://www.erfan.ir/>.

<sup>145</sup> محسن قرائتی; <http://www.qaraati.net/>.

<sup>146</sup> سولان پور اردبیلی

<sup>147</sup> <http://www.ardabili.com/>.

<sup>148</sup> ازدواج موقف؛ صیغه See: <http://movaghati.com/hamsaryabi.aspx>.

<sup>149</sup> In: حجت الاسلام راستگو: وقت آن است که سلاح ها را قلم کنیم See: دفتر توسعه و بلاگهای دینی <http://www.porsojoo.com/?q=fa/node/12419/print>; See also: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1892562,00.html>.

<sup>150</sup> نجف لک زایی; <http://www.lakzaee.net>.

<sup>151</sup> مرکز تحقیقات حکومت اسلامی قم

<sup>152</sup> محسن کدیور; <http://www.kadivar.com>.

important writings and the latest news about his public appearances bilingually (in Persian and English) on his website. Ahmad Qabel<sup>153</sup> publishes his theological writings through a blog. Hossein Ali Montazeri, who has been under house arrest for nearly 20 years, does not have access to any media inside Iran and depends entirely on his website,<sup>154</sup> to publish his latest decrets and writings. Montazeri's website is hosted outside the country in order to be safe from interference by the state security apparatus. He originally belonged to the inner circle of clerics who founded the Islamic Republic and was involved in formulating and adding the sections about the *Principle of the Leadership of a Religious Authority* to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic.<sup>155</sup> As a former student of Ruhollah Khomeini's who had reached the rank of a grand ayatollah himself, Montazeri was the designated successor of the "supreme leader" long before he died in early 1989. In the fall of 1988, however, Montazeri publicly protested against the mass execution of more than 4,000 political prisoners and subsequently fell into disfavor with the Islamic Republic's leadership.

Montazeri was the only high-ranking Islamic Republic official who abstained from the highest position of power in order to defend his own political opponents (the political prisoners who had been incarcerated for opposing "his" state). During the 1990s, Montazeri was under house arrest and subject to a total information blockade by the Islamic Republic's leadership. After the turn of the millennium, his followers and particularly his two sons discovered the internet as a great opportunity to penetrate the blockade and hence created a website for him. In 2002, Montazeri published his memoirs electronically on his website. The memoirs are among the most important historical sources about the revolution and the foundation of the Islamic Republic. A consortium of Iranian publishers in exile printed the online version of Montazeri's memoirs with all appendices in book format. For Montazeri's "imitators" and miscellaneous interested readers inside Iran, Monztazeri's website is the only place where they can access his memoirs. This website has now been blocked for several years and is only accessible from inside the country through proxy servers and anonymizer services.

In general, filtering seems to be enforced more rigorously in Qom than in any other place inside Iran. The primary target of the filtering system in Qom is Persian websites and blogs, because most seminarians and mullahs lack the necessary knowledge of foreign languages to benefit from other sources of information on the internet.

### **More about the Consequences - Internet Impact on the *Howze***

The digitization of all key texts of Islamic law and the most relevant Koran interpretations<sup>156</sup> (for Twelver Shiites) rationalized the centuries old continuous data preservation process in the *Howze*. Information technology gradually substituted the collective human memory of the *Howze* with a machine based digital memory. This technological complementation of data collection has not changed much in the *Howze*'s traditional cognitive framework. On the contrary, orthodox views seem to have solidified themselves through the process of digital rationalization. So far, the

<sup>153</sup> احمد قابل; <http://www.aghabel.persianblog.ir/>.

<sup>154</sup> <http://www.montazeri.org>.

<sup>155</sup> ولايت فقيره

<sup>156</sup> تفسير

*Howze* seems to have used the internet in an attempt to primarily to influence the outer world rather than being influenced by it.

### **The Internet as an Alternative Space for the Enrichment of Iranian Civil Society**

#### *The foundation and development of the digital daily newspaper ROOZ*

The digital daily news-“paper” *ROOZ*<sup>157</sup> was founded in April 2005; in the meantime, it has become one of the most frequently visited sources of political news in the Persian language available to exiles on the internet. Although the editors of *ROOZ* predominantly belong to the reformist camp and do not intend to overthrow the Islamic Republic, *ROOZ* was identified by the internet censors of the Islamic Republic as potentially dangerous and was blacklisted. Before it was blocked in February 2007, *ROOZ* had reached daily visitor numbers of over one million, 60 % of whom came from Iran. On average, each visitor accessed at least three different sections of the current issue (for example, the editorial by Masoud Behnoud,<sup>158</sup> the satirical column by Ebrahim Nabavi<sup>159</sup> and one more piece from the review section) and thus spent a relatively long time on the *ROOZ* website.<sup>160</sup>

The implementation of blocking caused the daily visitor numbers to drop drastically. However, a spontaneous grassroots movement of *ROOZ* readers inside and outside Iran formed within a short period of time. With a minimum of financial and logistic resources this grassroots movement managed to circumvent the censorship system and make *ROOZ* accessible to thousands of recipients inside the country. The grassroots activists were able to exploit a weakness in the Islamic Republic’s filtering system, which controls the access to websites but does not affect e-mail traffic. Therefore the regime is not capable of restricting these alternative distribution methods in the internet, which function without the knowledge and outside any direct control of the *ROOZ* editorial board. Since February 2007, complete issues of *ROOZ* are sent individually by e-mail to approximately 40,000 readers, using *Feedblitz*.<sup>161</sup> Several younger *ROOZ* subscribers with contacts within the student milieu inside the country forward this newsletter edition to thousands of addresses on private mailing lists. A student activist named B.Q., who is based in Germany, sends the *ROOZ* daily newsletter to 20,000 addresses. Many of “his” subscribers inside Iran forward *ROOZ* even farther, making the total number of recipients impossible to investigate.

*ROOZ* is a digital medium and can be produced and distributed without great logistical and financial effort. The editorial board is based outside the country and is not subject to any direct danger of censorship or arrest by the Islamic Republic. *ROOZ* obviously does not need a printing house and cannot be blackmailed by the government with its well known tactics such as withholding of rationed print paper or a ban on physical distribution of the paper. The editorial board consists of six members, who live in five different European and North American cities: Masoud Behnoud (editor in chief, London), Hossein Bastani<sup>162</sup> (editorial board member and

<sup>157</sup> Cf.: <http://www.roozonline.com>.

<sup>158</sup> مسعود بهنود

<sup>159</sup> ابراهیم نبیوی

<sup>160</sup> All information about *ROOZ* is based on interviews conducted with the editor in chief Masoud Behnoud on 7, 9 and 25 August 2007 in London.

<sup>161</sup> See: <http://www.feedblitz.com>.

<sup>162</sup> حسین باستانی

president of the *Iran Gooya*<sup>163</sup>), Nushabe Amiri<sup>164</sup> and Houshang Assadi<sup>165</sup> (editorial board members, both in Creteil in the suburbs of Paris), Ebrahim Nabavi (editorial board member and satirical columnist, Brussels), Nikahang Kousar<sup>166</sup> (cartoonist and graphic artist, Toronto). Until early 2007, Hossein Derakhshan (Toronto/Paris) was responsible for the technical aspects of the online publication. Afterwards, this job was delegated to a British web designer without any knowledge of Persian who works closely with the editor in chief Behnoud in London.

The editorial board's work is coordinated entirely in cyberspace: The editors meet every evening when the content of each daily issue has been finalized in a private chat room, using *Yahoo! messenger* to decide the hierarchy of themes and choose the headlines. Masoud Behnoud is the most professionally experienced member of the *ROOZ* editorial board.<sup>167</sup> The other members of the editorial board are up to three generations younger than Behnoud and with the exception of Houshang Assadi started their journalistic careers after the revolution of 1979. Noushabe Amiri and Houshang Assadi collaborated with the official press outlets of the Communist *Tudeh* Party's after the revolution.<sup>168</sup> The others came from completely different social and political backgrounds. Hossein Bastani was among the closest associates of the former president, Khatami, responsible for a confidential newsletter that informed the president about the most recent international political news and developments. Nikahang Kousar comes from a traditional religious family background and started his career as a cartoonist in the mid-1990s in the temporary period of relative medial pluralism under Khatami. Ebrahim Nabavi started his political career as the interior minister's deputy for political affairs in the early 1980s, when his present-day colleague Assadi was in prison. During the 1980s, he gradually distanced himself from the government and became a film critic, satirist and novelist. In the meantime, more than 50 books by Nabavi are available on the legal Iranian book market, although he has been living

<sup>163</sup> شرکت ایران گویا

<sup>164</sup> نوشابه امیری

<sup>165</sup> هوشنگ اسدی

<sup>166</sup> نیک آهنگ کوثر

<sup>167</sup> Masoud Behnoud (born 1946) has been abroad since July 2002. He has more than 40 years of experience as a journalist and editor. Before the revolution, he produced eight documentaries, over 100 television shows and 300 radio programs for the national Iranian television organization and wrote more than 20 books on historical topics. During the 1980s, he belonged to the editorial board of the cultural journal *Adineh* آدینه, that was banned in the 1990s. From July 2002 until early summer 2007 he published a blog named *Behnoud-e Digar* بہنود دیگر. Since June 2007 he has a website named [www.masoudbehnoud.com](http://www.masoudbehnoud.com). There he re-published his articles from *ROOZ*, *E'temad-e Melli* ([www.etemademelli.ir](http://www.etemademelli.ir)), the Persian online service of BBC, etc. His actual blog entries are published on the same website under the rubric *Shab Neveshteha* شب نوشته ها ([http://masoudbehnoud.com/web\\_log](http://masoudbehnoud.com/web_log)).

<sup>168</sup> Before the 1979 revolution, Houshang Assadi was a member of the editorial board of *Keyhan* daily newspaper. After revolution and the opening of SAVAK archives his name appeared on the list of SAVAK's informers. The communist Tudeh Party defended Assadi and claimed to have sent him on a mission to "infiltrate" SAVAK. In 1983, Assadi was arrested together with a large number of leading members of the Tudeh Party's central apparatus by the Iranian Republic and was released at the end of the 1980s. This time, he allegedly became a collaborator of the Iranian Republic's internal security organizations. In the 1980s, a substantial number of inflammatory articles against secular intellectuals as the "fifth columns" of the "cultural invasion" of the Islamic Republic were published in *Keyhan-e Havayi* کیهان هوابی. After his relocation to Paris und the beginning of his journalistic activities for ROOZ, Assadi was accused by several ex-political prisoners from the 1980s, including Iraj Mesdaghi ایرج مصدقی of being a collaborator of the Iranian Republic's intelligence apparatus. These accusations do not seem to have affected Assadi's standing within the *ROOZ* editorial board. Cf. Mesdaghi's article: چه کسانی تبع زنگیان مست را تیز کردند؟ هوشنگ اسدی و طرح تهاجم فرهنگی <http://www.arashmag.com/content/view/646/46/>

in exile since April 2003. As journalists, Behnoud, Nabavi and Bastani spent several periods in prison during the 1990s. None of the *ROOZ* editors has ever been able to travel to Iran without risking arrest. In early August 2007, Soheil Asefi<sup>169</sup> and two other *ROOZ* correspondents, who wrote under pseudonyms, were arrested in Tehran.

The foundation of *ROOZ* stems from an initiative by the Dutch Member of Parliament Farah Karimi.<sup>170</sup> In 2005, she was the driving force behind a bill that obligated the Dutch government to invest 20 million Euros in support of a Persian satellite television project outside Iran. The present team of the *ROOZ* editorial board, with two additional individuals named Mohsen Sazegara<sup>171</sup> and Said Razavi Faqih,<sup>172</sup> were the only applicants to carry out the satellite television project. Later on, Sazegara and Razavi Faqih separated from the group.

The bill provoked an extreme reaction by the Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic's pressure on the Dutch Association of Industrialists led to the government's capitulation and decision to put the original project on hold. Later on, a new plan was developed to distribute the 20 million Euros amongst several smaller projects, which should all be related to promoting the free flow of information to Iranian civil society and the promotion of media pluralism. One of these projects was the Amsterdam-based satellite and internet radio station *Radio Zamaneh*, under the current directorship of the ex-BBC producer Mehdi Jami. Behnoud and his associates decided for a digital daily newspaper.

At first, the founders of *ROOZ* intended to buy the Iranian internet news gateway *Gooya*<sup>173</sup> with the help of a Dutch NGO. The founder of *Gooya*, Farshad Bayan,<sup>174</sup> was leaving Brussels to work for the expanding online section of BBC's Persian service. *Gooya* is a unique Persian internet media gateway that lists a large variety of digital periodicals, websites of political parties and organizations with different orientations, thematic websites, internet radio and satellite stations from in- and outside Iran all beside each other in its rubrics. Many professional journalists in Iran begin their daily work in their offices by logging on to *Gooya* and *Gooya News* (with the help of proxy servers) and using the daily updated link compilation in *Gooya* to follow the domestic and international news.<sup>175</sup>

A fusion between the *ROOZ* initiative and *Gooya* would have been plausible, as both of them aimed at bringing together the Persian media from within and outside of the country. Therefore, the company, which later published the digital daily newspaper *ROOZ*, was named *Iran Gooya*. The deal with *Gooya* fell through but the company, directed by Hossein Bastani, kept its original

<sup>169</sup> سهیل آصفی

<sup>170</sup> Farah Karimi left Iran in 1979 and came to Germany as a student. Later, she relocated to the Netherlands, where she became active in the Dutch Green Party. Ms Karimi, whose sister was executed by the Islamic Republic during the early 1980s, always remained interested in the human rights situation in Iran throughout the eight years she served as a Dutch MP.

<sup>171</sup> محسن سازگارا; Founding member of the IRGC in the early 1980s and later dissident, left Iran in 2001 for London and later moved to the US where he has been working as a political consultant for various Washington think tanks and for the *Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre* in New Haven in the past years. He regularly appears as a political commentator on VOA's Persian satellite and internet TV.

<sup>172</sup> سعید رضوی فقیه; A PhD candidate in Political Science in Paris, he is currently the president of the European Islamic Student Associations (of Iranian students) شورای مرکزی اتحادیه انجمنهای اسلامی دانشجویان در اروپا (اروپا).

<sup>173</sup> گویا; See: <http://www.gooya.com>

<sup>174</sup> فرشاد بیان

<sup>175</sup> This information was provided by the Tehran correspondent of an Italian daily newspaper in an interview on August 1, 2007.

name and was registered in Paris. *ROOZ* is sponsored with an annual subsidy of 300,000 Euros by the Dutch NGO HIVOS. All regular editors work for a minimal monthly salary of approximately 1300 Euros. Occasionally, some freelance collaborators also get paid a symbolic honorarium for writing articles or translating pieces for the English section of *ROOZ*.

Generally, the future of *ROOZ* is guaranteed more by the idealism of its writers than the financial aid of the Dutch NGO. The *ROOZ* editorial board brings together younger and older journalists, members of the current student movement inside the country, exiled activists from various generations and different political backgrounds and is distributed on a large scale through a number of decentralized grass roots initiatives. The Islamic Republic's internet censors are extremely sensitive about *ROOZ*, because it represents the kind of media pluralism that the Islamic Republic has been trying to prevent since its own foundation.

Before the internet era and the foundation of the news gateway *Gooya*, the number of Persian journals published regularly outside the country was limited. The largest periodicals were the weekly papers *Keyhan*<sup>176</sup> and *Nimrooz*<sup>177</sup> in London and *Shahrvand*<sup>178</sup> in Toronto as well as a large number of (amateurish) local and regional community papers that never reached international distribution. The Washington-based *Iran Times* weekly newspaper was first published in the late 1960s but remained practically unknown among Iranians in Europe.

Journalists abroad had to depend on these papers and on a small number of political and cultural monthly journals like *Rahavard*<sup>179</sup> and *Par* in the US, *Rouzegar-e no*<sup>180</sup> in Paris and *Kaveh*<sup>181</sup> in Munich, all produced and distributed internationally under extremely complicated circumstances. Great logistical obstacles have also caused the internationally far-flung diaspora communities to have only delayed access to Iran-specific sources of information from within and outside of the country. With the beginning of the internet era and the foundation of news gateways like *Gooya* and digital newspapers like *ROOZ*, the Persian diaspora's communities grew together. They also gained access to a large number of digitized media including newspapers, official government TV and radio stations from inside the country, which until the late 1990s were mostly out of their reach. The immediate character of cyber-journalism and digital publication led to the disappearance of the typical "time lag" for news to reach the Iranian diaspora.

### Cyber Journalism from Exile – About Ebrahim Nabavi

In early 2000, Ebrahim Nabavi was put on trial in Teheran and received yet another prison sentence because of something he wrote in his satirical column in a Tehran daily newspaper. After being released from prison, he decided to publish parts of his writings on the internet. Like many other journalists, he first thought the internet would enable him to remove himself completely from the danger of being censored and persecuted by the government. With the help of the award-winning Iranian pioneer web designer Reza Abedini,<sup>182</sup> whom he knew from his

<sup>176</sup> کیهان; See: <http://www.kayhanlondon.com>.

<sup>177</sup> نیمروز; See: <http://www.nimrooz.com>.

<sup>178</sup> شهروند; See: <http://shahrvand.ca>.

<sup>179</sup> ره اورد

<sup>180</sup> روزگار نو

<sup>181</sup> کاوه

<sup>182</sup> رضا عابدینی; See: <http://www.rezaabedini.com/>.

publishing house *Rouzane*,<sup>183</sup> Nabavi created his first website [www.nabavionline.com](http://www.nabavionline.com) toward the end of 2007.<sup>184</sup> This website was, as its name suggested, built around Ebrahim Nabavi as a person and served as a platform to publish a variety of his political, literary and satirical writings as well as audio files with music clips and commentary and comedic performances by Nabavi. On the day of its inauguration, *Nabavionline* had approximately 4,000 visitors; afterwards this increased steadily until he had about 15,000 visitors per day. At that time, although the internet still had not turned into a mass phenomenon in Iran, Nabavi primarily targeted readers inside the country. In that context, these numbers were relatively high. Nabavi published his satirical column on *Nabavionline* and simply asked those newspapers that printed the material off the internet, to transfer a specific honorarium into his account. At any given time, he was publishing around 20 commercial advertisement banners on his site, which generated the equivalent of 4,000 to 5,000 Euros per month. *Nabavionline* was and probably still is the first and only cultural-literary website in Persian that became a steady source of income for its editor. However, all technical facilities and people involved in maintaining the site were in Tehran; this made the editor vulnerable to possible attempts of blackmailing by the government. Eventually, in April 2003, Nabavi left Iran to escape further persecution by the judiciary. From Brussels he maintained contact with his webmaster and continued publishing his material on *Nabavionline*. In September, 2003, upon instructions from the Tehran “press prosecutor,” Said Mortazavi,<sup>185</sup> the webmaster suddenly ceased all contact with Nabavi, blocked his access to the website and withheld all text, audio and picture files, none of which Nabavi had copied to take with him on his way to exile. The *Nabavionline* site was thereby shut down from one day to the next. Nabavi’s initial idealization of the internet as a safe haven from government censorship and persecution proved to be an illusion.

Farshad Bayan, who was then the owner and publisher of *Gooya* in Brussels, offered Nabavi an exclusive page on *Gooya News*, which was under his sole editorial control. Within a short period of time, this page reached daily visitor numbers of 15,000 to 18,000. At the same time, Nabavi started working for the Persian online services of *Deutsche Welle*<sup>186</sup> and *Voice of America* (VOA),<sup>187</sup> using their satellite and online facilities to publish his satirical text and audio material. At present he belongs to the editorial board of *ROOZ*, produces a weekly video program for the online service of *Radio Zamaneh* and still continues to write two to three articles per day under various pseudonyms for newspapers and journals published inside Iran. He maintains all of these professional contacts using the internet. Some editions of Nabavi’s online TV program, *E’teraf* (“Confession”),<sup>188</sup> which he published until the end of 2005 for VOA’s Persian program, are “immortalized” on YouTube. *E’teraf* was a parody of television programs produced by the MOIS, in which prominent imprisoned dissidents were dragged in front of TV cameras and forced to confess to all political and moral “crimes” of which they had been accused by state security organizations.

<sup>183</sup> انتشارات روزنہ

<sup>184</sup> All information in this section is based on interviews with Ebrahim Nabavi on 10 Monday 13 August 2007.

<sup>185</sup> سعید مرتضوی

<sup>186</sup> In the meantime, this service has been expanded with a large financial and personnel investment: Cf.: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/0,641,00.html>.

<sup>187</sup> See: <http://www.voanews.com/persian>.

<sup>188</sup> اعتراف; See, for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLxUye39yc4>.

In October 2004, Nabavi started a graphically and technically simple website named *Doomdam*,<sup>189</sup> where he published his literary and cultural criticism. Soon after its inauguration, *Doomdam* was blocked in Iran. Some of the pieces documented on *Doomdam* had been previously published in Nabavi's weekly program on *Radio Zamaneh* in audio or video format. In the meantime, Nabavi has given up his exclusive page on the *Gooya* site. *Gooya* has now been blocked in Iran for several years and no longer functions as a political communications hub between the political scenes inside and outside the country. In the beginning, about 45 % of Doodam's readers were from inside Iran and 55 % from abroad. The blocking of the site caused the daily visitor numbers of *Doomdam* to drop from 5,000 to 2,500 to 3,000.

The internet facilitates communication between exiled journalists and their audiences inside and outside the country. It cannot, however, replace live contact between the two sides. In the case of Nabavi, who only writes about Iran and derives his material from political and social issues from within the Iranian society, the isolation of exile led to a gradual thematic impoverishment of his writings for which even the advantages of the internet cannot compensate.

### **The Cyber Radio Station *Zamaneh* – An Experiment in Participatory Citizens' Journalism from Exile**

The Amsterdam based *Radio Zamaneh* would not be able to exist without the internet. Since June 2006, this radio station has been working under the directorship of Mehdi Jami<sup>190</sup> and the supervision of a board of directors consisting of journalists and politicians in the Netherlands. *Radio Zamaneh* was founded under the guidance of a Dutch NGO named "Press Now." *Radio Zamaneh* was originally one of the "smaller" projects that grew out of the initiative of the Dutch MP Farah Karimi to support the free flow of information into Iranian civil society and promote media pluralism amongst Iranians. Similar to *ROOZ*, *Radio Zamaneh* established itself through the collaboration of a core of professional journalists and administrators with the support of a grassroots movement of "citizen (radio) journalists." There are currently 14 journalists, technicians and administrators working at *Radio Zamaneh*'s head quarters in Amsterdam. The station also has 150 paid contributors who live in 30 different cities around the world, only two of them inside Iran. Some contributors who reside in the neighboring European countries regularly travel to Amsterdam to record their programs. Others record their programs using computer equipment and send them in as e-mail attachments or upload them directly onto the radio's server. Among the freelance contributors are several renowned exiled authors like Shahrnoush Parsipour<sup>191</sup> from Berkeley, Reza Daneshvar<sup>192</sup> from Paris, Abbas Ma'rufi<sup>193</sup> from Berlin, with their own weekly programs and specific regular audiences within the virtual community around *Radio Zamaneh*. These are all writers, whose works are strictly censored and banned inside Iran. The distribution of their writings abroad is limited by the logistic problems of Persian book distribution abroad. Without the online community of *Radio Zamaneh*, many younger Iranians would have never even had heard their names.

<sup>189</sup> Cf.: <http://www.doomdam.com>.

<sup>190</sup> مهدی جامی; All information in this section is based on an interview with Mehdi Jami on 9 August 2007.

<sup>191</sup> شهرنوش پارسی پور

<sup>192</sup> رضا دانشور

<sup>193</sup> علیس معروفی

Mehdi Jami, who himself started working for Radio Zamaneh on 1 June 2006, found the radio's central staff through an advertisement and screening process that partly took place in Turkey and targeted mostly younger Iranian journalists from inside Iran. In the first week of July 2006, a workshop was organized in Amsterdam during which the future contributors were familiarized with the general mission of the radio station and the principles of "citizen journalism." They subsequently formulated the founding Manifesto of *Radio Zamaneh*<sup>194</sup> together. Immediately after the completion of the workshop, *Radio Zamaneh* started a 40 day long trial period. Programs were written and recorded with computers and broadcast over the internet.

Starting on 1 September 2006 (on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> the anniversary of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution), *Radio Zamaneh* gained satellite access and started broadcasting on short wave on 7 September. Its recording studio was officially opened on 11 Sepember 2006. In the beginning, the program consisted of two hours of features and two hours of music. Since January 2007, one additional hour of features is produced daily in Sweden. Every daily program is broadcast between 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm Amsterdam time on shortwave and through live internet feed. Later, most features remain accessible for the public in the archives of the radio's extensive website. Once every week, *Radio Zamaneh* broadcasts a program named *Radio Hamayesh*,<sup>195</sup> with reports from public events in the Tehran *House of Artists*<sup>196</sup> and the evening events of the journal *Bokhara*.<sup>197</sup> On weekends, *Radio Zamaneh* offers smaller community radio stations like *Ghasedak*<sup>198</sup> in Zurich the opportunity to broadcast their programs through its facilities and reach an audience beyond their small Iranian diaspora community in Switzerland.

### Literary Communication on the Internet through Blogs

*Reza Ghassemi (Paris), the Founder of Persian Cyber Literature*

On 10 August 2001, the Paris-based exile Iranian author and musician Reza Ghassemi<sup>199</sup> was the first Iranian writer to expand the literary communication with his audience inside Iran and in the Iranian diaspora into cyberspace.<sup>200</sup> He was the first Iranian internet author who published an online journal on his website (without using special software and templates) and therefore should be considered the first Persian blogger. Using the internet, Ghassemi re-published a number of his plays, short stories and novels in electronic format. He also started writing a new novel in electronic format. Ghassemi has been living in Paris since the 1980s without ever having travelled back to Iran. Parts of his writings have been published in Iran with the permission of the Iranian Republic's *Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance*. He also publishes some of his work in Persian through *Editions Khavaran*<sup>201</sup> and the French translations through *Editions Phébus*, both in Paris. Ghassemi's Persian writings have achieved vast distribution through the internet. Until it was filtered and blocked in February 2005, Ghassemi's website had 4,000 daily

<sup>194</sup> See: <http://radiozamaneh.org/tmp/zamaneh.pdf>.

<sup>195</sup> رادیو همایش

<sup>196</sup> خانه هنرمندان

<sup>197</sup> شبهای بخارا

<sup>198</sup> رادیو قاصدک; <http://www.ghasedak.ch>.

<sup>199</sup> رضا قاسمی

<sup>200</sup> Cf.: [www.rezaghassemi.org](http://www.rezaghassemi.org) and its literary supplement *Davaat* at <http://www.rezaghassemi.org/davaat>.

<sup>201</sup> انتشارات خاوران

visitors, with 70 % from inside Iran. Afterward filtering began, the visitor numbers fell to approximately 1,500 per day.<sup>202</sup>

Reza Ghassemi's initiative to establish an interactive relationship with his readers is of historical importance. He was the first Iranian writer who involved his worldwide readers in the creation process of one of his works and established a relationship through dialogue with them. In his online diary, readers could follow up on the daily progress of one of his latest novels.<sup>203</sup> As he had disabled the online comment function on his site, he received feedback from his readers mostly through personal e-mails. Occasionally some fragments of the novel were commented upon in other blogs. He incorporated some of these reader responses in the further development of the text. His novel had two other provisional titles,<sup>204</sup> which he changed in continuous dialogue with his readers. The printed version of the novel, published in August 2007 by *Editions Khavaran*, contains an appendix that documents the meta texts about the novel from his blog and from the communication with his readers.

The website [www.rezaghassemi.org](http://www.rezaghassemi.org) also contains a supplement under the address [www.rezaghassemi.org/davaat](http://www.rezaghassemi.org/davaat), through which other exiled writers re-publish their works in electronic format. The electronic publication allows them to reach a larger audience in the Iranian diaspora and inside Iran.<sup>205</sup> *Davaat* is a virtual publishing house that allows younger authors like Mariam Hole,<sup>206</sup> who became known as in the exile literary scene, to make their works known to the Iranian audience within the country. Despite its having been blocked since February 2005, Reza Ghassemi's website is still accessed by users from inside Iran through various proxy servers.

### **The Author Mahshid Amirshahi and Her Rediscovery by the Iranian Audience through the Internet**

Since 2003, the internet has been instrumental in re-establishing the disrupted literary communication between the exiled Iranian author Mahshid Amirshahi<sup>207</sup> in Paris and her worldwide audience. In 1979, Mahshid Amirshahi was – with the exception of Mostafa Rahimi<sup>208</sup> – the only intellectual who, in the middle of the revolutionary euphoria, warned against Khomeini's rising theocratic absolutism. Until 1979, she was known to Iranians as a short story writer and translator. Shortly after the Islamic Republic came to power, Amirshahi left Iran and moved to Paris, where she became engaged in the exile resistance organization<sup>209</sup> of

<sup>202</sup> This information is based on an interview with Reza Ghassemi on 14 August 2007 in Puteaux outside of Paris.

<sup>203</sup> وردی که بره ها میخواهند

<sup>204</sup> دیوانه و برج مونپارناس later, چهل پله تا آن سه تار جادویی

<sup>205</sup> The novel ("A Mystic in Paris") by the exiled author Kamran Behnia was published in 2005 in Abbas Ma'rufi's *Gardoon* Publishing House in Berlin but faced logistical distribution problems and did not reach a large audience. Six months after the print version, an electronic edition was published on *Davaat* and only then, the novel was acknowledged by critics inside Iran. The novel never would have received an official license by the Iranian Republic's *Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance* to be published officially inside Iran.

<sup>206</sup> مریم هوله

<sup>207</sup> مهشید امیرشاهی

<sup>208</sup> مصطفی رحیمی

<sup>209</sup> نهضت مقاومت ملی ایران; See: <http://www.namir.info>.

Shapour Bakhtiar.<sup>210</sup> During her exile years, Mahshid Amirshahi wrote five novels and numerous Essays and political articles,<sup>211</sup> which were all printed by publishing houses outside Iran.<sup>212</sup> In 1988, after Ruhollah Khomeini issued a death warrant against the writer Salman Rushdie, Amirshahi became part of a group of exiled Iranian writers who founded an international committee for the defense of Rushdie. While Rushdie has been under constant police surveillance since the death warrant, the Iranian members of this committee have never had any protection against threats by terrorists sent by the Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic reacted to Amirshahi's engagement with a general ban of her works to the extent that even her name was not allowed to be mentioned in books and journal articles inside Iran. Through these measures, Mahshid Amirshahi gradually became unknown to younger Iranians who grew up in the Islamic Republic during the past 25 years; the Islamic Republic managed to temporarily erase her name from the collective short term memory of Iranians.

This situation changed with the beginning of the internet era. A group of Amirshahi's readers built a website for her,<sup>213</sup> making a large selection of her work available online. Since 2006, Mahshid Amirshahi appeared several times in television programs<sup>214</sup> of Voice of America's online and satellite TV service,<sup>215</sup> where she was interviewed on a variety of political topics, for example on the anniversary of the referendum for the foundation of the Islamic Republic in March 1979. During these interviews, Mahshid Amirshahi's web and e-mail addresses were shown in captions underneath the video images. This "advertisement" increased the visitor numbers on her website to more than 20,000 per day. She also received thousands of personal e-mails from viewers of VOA's online and satellite programs, who had just recently become familiar with her work.

One of Mahshid Amirshahi's rare public appearances and readings was on 4 August 2006 in London,<sup>216</sup> where two conference panels were dedicated to her. Several video clips of her readings were recorded during the panel meetings and broadcast on YouTube on the same evening. Within less than 24 hours, these clips were advertised in a number of Persian blogs and accessed more than 30,000 times.

### The “Functional Expansion” of the Internet and Blogs in Iran

The systematic homogenization of the media forced many members of the younger urban middle classes and intelligentsia to search in the internet for whatever the state-controlled media was denying them. At the same time, internet chat rooms developed into places of anonymous and therefore secure social encounters between young men and women and users from different social class backgrounds, for example from the northern and southern parts of the capital. Under “normal” circumstances of life in the Islamic Republic, due to omnipresent police surveillance

<sup>210</sup> شاپور بختیار

<sup>211</sup> در حضر، در سفر، عروسی عباس خان، دده قم خیر، ماه عسل شهریانو، هزار بیشه

<sup>212</sup> *Ketab Corporation* نشر کتاب سهراپ and *Nashr-e Ketab-e Sohrab* شرکت کتاب in Los Angeles and *Baran Publishers* نشر باران in Stockholm.

<sup>213</sup> Compare: <http://www.amirshahi.org>.

<sup>214</sup> <http://www.voanews.com/persian/roundtableram.cfm?CFID=187226117&CFTOKEN=24544692>.

<sup>215</sup> <http://www.voanews.com/persian/>.

<sup>216</sup> The 6th biennial conference of the International Society for Iranian Studies (ISIS) from 3 to 5 August 2006 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

and the permanent pressure of traditional repressive social control mechanisms that impair social interaction beyond certain class boundaries, these virtual companions would never be able to meet and interact.

In the same process, blogs developed into efficient instruments in the hands of the members of the fragmented and closed Iranian society to express their desire to communicate amongst each other openly. Writing blogs does not require any journalistic training. Every young person with basic knowledge of computers and a certain writing talent can become a blogger. Blogs can be written under pseudonyms and bloggers can rely on a range of security measures – such as the use of gratis services and proxy servers – to keep their identities secret even in a police state like the Islamic Republic. This anonymity saved them from persecution by the state and from repressive moral judgment by the society at large. There are even, for instance, several blogs like *Hamzaad*,<sup>217</sup> through which Iranian gays and lesbians write about themselves. This kind of open communication about a taboo subject would not have been possible without the anonymity of the internet.

Iranian blogs are a result of the cultural assimilation of this medium in contemporary Iranian socio-culture and therefore they share a number of common features with the Iranian society of today. At the time of the Islamic revolution, the total number of Iranians was about 35 million. In the meantime, this number has exceeded 70 million, which means that more than half of all Iranians were born after 1979 and are under 30 years old. These demographic features of Iranian society are reflected in Iranian blogs. By the same token, certain behavioral characteristics of today's Iranian youth can be followed in their use of the internet and blogs.

Today's urban middle class young Iranians seem to be particularly interested in fashion trends, especially in clothes and music. In a similar way, young Iranian internet users develop sudden preferences for certain internet services and communication methods, for example, *Orkut* and *Yahoo! Messenger* and chat services.

### **Observations about Persian Blog Language**

The language of Persian blogs is predominated by the sociolect<sup>218</sup> of today's Iranian youth. It does not follow the traditional rhetorical rules of standard written Persian and floats between written and spoken registers. Younger bloggers do not, for instance, observe the linguistic honorific codes of written Persian communication. The Persian linguistic community in Iran is diglossic, i.e., there is a remarkable difference between the spoken colloquial and the written registers of the language. For centuries, the definition of norms for written Persian prose was controlled and defined by an educated minority of "professional writers," who were usually in the service of courts. The hermetic Persian writing style of court scribes was for the most part incomprehensible for the vast majority of the speakers of Persian. The Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 democratized the linguistic culture in the Iranian society because it reduced the gap between the written and spoken registers. Pioneers of democratic linguistic culture like Ali

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<sup>217</sup> See: <http://hamzaad.blogspot.com>.

<sup>218</sup> A *sociolect* is a dialect used by a social group or a variety of speech that is used by a particular social class or group.

Akbar Dehkhoda<sup>219</sup> used the colloquial register and even elements of regional dialects in their socio-critical writings and thereby changed the norms.

One hundred years after the Constitutional Revolution, the Persian writing style of the internet era has further removed the sharp limits between the written and spoken registers. This new style is not defined by individuals like Dehkhoda but by a mass of unidentifiable internet users. Stylistic changes can be observed in the choice of words and expressions, the invention of new idiomatic expressions, the syntactic structure of sentences and in the different pragmatic use or even the total lack of certain “honorific” codes.

The syntax of Persian blog language generally tends to be simple, i.e. sentences are “paratactic.”<sup>220</sup> Spelling and stylistic “mistakes” seem to be used intentionally as stylistic features. During the past few years, a certain Persian sociolect has emerged in Iranian chat room of *Yahoo*. This sociolect is the “lingua franca” of all users independent from their social class, gender and ethnic origin. It is a version of today’s Persian youth language, scattered with code words and written in short, often incomplete sentences using the Latin alphabet. The Persian language of blogs, internet chat rooms and even text messaging on mobile phones has produced a number of new code words and cryptic idiomatic expressions<sup>221</sup> reminiscent of the contemporary “secret colloquial youth language.” In the meantime, several socio-linguistic studies have explored this phenomenon.<sup>222</sup>

Since the beginning of the computer era in Iran, the Academy of Persian Language and Literature<sup>223</sup> in Tehran has systematically worked on the creation of a terminologically stringent Persian special language for information technology. The academy regularly publishes lists of recommended new words and rules for spelling, style and translation. A large number of the academy’s new invented words are recommendations for technical terms in the special language of information technology.

Recently, Mahmoud Ahmadnejad’s cabinet declared the “Academy’s” terminological and stylistic recommendations as obligatory rules for all internet communications, including blogs and websites.<sup>224</sup> It is questionable whether such a bureaucratic act can be enforced outside the government apparatus. It is, however, remarkable that for the first time since the foundation of the Islamic Republic a government has interfered directly in language regulation matters, apparently out of concern for the fate of written Persian language. Interestingly, a number of language critics and purists outside the government have expressed similar concerns about the degeneration of the written language in the internet.<sup>225</sup> The majority of young bloggers show no interest in these regulations, as they are constantly looking for ways to demonstrate their disobedience toward the state’s authority. Intentional diversions from the rules of written

<sup>219</sup> على اکبر دهخدا

<sup>220</sup> Clauses joined without using conjunctions; the combination of clauses or phrases without the use of conjunctions such as “and” or “so,” e.g. in “He saved my life – he deserves a medal.”

<sup>221</sup> بادیزن جیگر = غیبت، پشت سر برخی حرف زدن که باعث خنک شدن دل برخی از جمله غیبت کننده میشود؛ پاناسونیک = دختر ناز و خوش اندام؛ خر به خراسان بردن = زیره به کرمان بردن؛ خفن = عالی، ترسناک، خوب و تحسین انگیز، جالب و دیدنی؛ ستمالیس = فر هنگ چالپوسی؛ رفتم تو سایتش = تو نخ کسی رفتن. الخ.

<sup>222</sup> اکرامی، محمود: مردم شناسی ارتباطات مردمی. تهران 1386؛ اکرامی، محمود: مردم شناسی ارتباطات خومنانی. تهران 1386. Compare مشیری، مهشید: فر هنگ ارتباطات جوانان. تهران 1386. سماانی، مهدی: فر هنگ ارتباطات ربان مخفی. تهران 1384.

<sup>223</sup> Cf.: <http://www.persianacademy.ir/>.

<sup>224</sup> Cf.: <http://www.persianacademy.ir/UserFiles/Image/word03/h0203.pdf>.

<sup>225</sup> [http://ashouri.malakut.org/archives/2007/04/post\\_42.shtml](http://ashouri.malakut.org/archives/2007/04/post_42.shtml).

language are a matter of identity for rebellious young bloggers who wish to free themselves from the burden of tradition.

### **The Emancipation of the Individual from the Collective: The “Positive Ego-Centrism” of Blogs**

Blogs seem to have triggered a general trend toward individualism in the political culture of Iran. This is a new and positive form of “ego-centrism,” completely different from the modesty and self-denial typical of the old political culture of Iran, which certainly has its roots in religious mysticism. During the 1960s and 70s and in the immediate post-1979 revolution era, political engagement usually meant involvement in organizations and parties. In the pre-revolution years, all political organizations and interest groups except the official *Rastakhiz Party*<sup>226</sup> were illegal and could only exist as underground movements or in exile. The entire left of the political spectrum consisted of factions that—due to their militant approaches—could only work as conspiratorial organizations with semi-legal “outlets” (in form of oppositional pseudo-student organizations) abroad. In most cases, the intellectual and political leaders of these organizations were anonymous and it was not clear through which procedures and with which qualifications they had become leaders. The authors of these organizations’ various publications never signed their pieces with their own names and remained unknown as individuals. Most of these organizations did not even have published political programs and publicly accessible statutes.<sup>227</sup> They attracted and recruited their body of activists through a highly mystified emotional process, rather than by arguments and rational thinking. The mass of individual “sympathizers” dissolved in the collective and was subject to the authority of an entity of faceless, out-of-reach leaders. Simple activists remained unnamed, unless they lost their lives in the course of political action. In the immediate post-revolution era, the Islamic Republic’s violence took the lives of thousands of leftist activists in waves of torture and execution. Their individual names and pictures were published posthumously in books and journals, almost as if those parties wanted to gain political capital from the number of “their martyrs.” The inherent individualism of blogs terminated this tradition of self denial and collectivism in the political culture of Iran. In a way, blogs are symbols for the emancipation of the individual from the force of the “collective” and from patriarchal traditional power structures.

### **The Functional Expansion of Persian Blogs and What Can Be Expected from Them**

The functional expansion of Persian blogs is a reaction to social restrictions imposed by a totalitarian theocratic regime that even after 30 years has not been able to force its ideal social order upon the Iranian society in its entirety. The Islamic Republic’s constant endeavor to

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<sup>226</sup> حزب رستاخیز ایران

<sup>227</sup> The *Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization* (MKO) and the *Organization of Peoples’ Fadaian Guerrillas of Iran* (OPFGI), سازمان مجاهدین خلق ( MKO )، سازمان چریکهای فدایی خلق ( OPFGI ) , did not have any published texts before and even long after the revolution showing which political, economic and cultural program they were suggesting for the country. Their only “programmatic” publications from the pre-revolution era contained general, ideological debates about the strategy and tactics of “guerilla war” and rather superficial political and historical essays to draw lines between themselves and traditional left and/or national-liberal political parties like the Tudeh Party حزب توده and the National Front جبهه ملی and their entourage.

regulate all areas of social life has made certain necessary social institutions disappear or has changed them so drastically that the young majority of the population regards them as dysfunctional. Blogs are flexible communications and social tools that can be under the complete control of their owners. Therefore, they are preferably used by the younger generation to replace certain missing or dysfunctional social institutions in Iranian society.

It so happens that blogs can replace nonexistent or dysfunctional media such as daily newspapers and specialized journals. Sometimes they become venues for virtual encounters between young men and women, who in real life would not be able to get together out of fear of persecution by the state. Occasionally they replace political parties and function as platforms for political expression. The functional expansion of Persian blogs is a symptom of a social order incapable of fulfilling the desires and needs of its citizens. Blogs will continue to promote the culture of individualism among the younger Iranian generation and may have an indirect long-term social and political impact on the future of Iranian society.

## Conclusion

The beginning of the internet era has created new possibilities for Iranian civil society to circumvent the government-imposed total control on the established media and to participate in an emerging independent virtual information society. The spectacular growth of Persian blogs since the summer of 2001 is an indication of Iranian society's urgent need for alternative means of free expression. The early history of blogging in Iran has been dominated by professional journalists, many of whom became victims of repressions introduced during the second term of the reformist President Khatami in 2001 and continued more severely when his successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, seized power in the summer of 2005.

The Islamic Republic's conservative factions initiated and sponsored the creation and expansion of the country's internet infrastructure since 1989. Paradoxically, the same forces have constantly tried to restrict free internet access and independent publishing via the internet by imposing severe filtering and blocking policies as well as pursuing dissident internet authors and publishers for defying the regime's laws and regulations for public expression. The regime and the various factions within the camp of its ideological followers also try to use the internet as a theater, where they seek to demonstrate their political and ideological presence.

This ambivalence in the development and socio-political function of the internet in Iran becomes apparent when one closely examines the history of the digitization of the holy city of Qom since Ayatollah Khamenei took over as the country's supreme leader, succeeding Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989. The digitalization of key texts of Twelver Shiite Islamic Sharia, the computerized management and surveillance of the religious training environment of Qom as well as the creation of virtual "homes" for all leading spiritual leaders all show how the most conservative Twelver Shiite factions in Iran are exploiting computers and the internet as an instrument for exporting ideology, while trying to avoid any outside influence. The emergence of conservative religious internet publications and particularly personal blogs offers outsiders new insight into the daily life and rituals in the closed society of the religious establishment of Qom and its dependencies.

Five case studies on the digital newspaper ROOZ, the online radio station *Zamaneh*, the web publishing activities of the exiled journalist Ebrahim Nabavi and the exiled writers Reza Ghassemi and Mahshid Amirshahi illustrate how the internet has created new possibilities for the

Iranian diaspora communities to re-establish communications link between exiled dissident intellectuals and their potential readers and recipients within and outside side the country.

The final part of the paper deals with the phenomenon of Persian blogs as a means of mass communication for the young population of Iran at large. Blogs were discovered by young Iranians as something to replace many institutions missing or suppressed by the totalitarian rule of the Islamic Republic. The assimilation of the blog in Persian socio-culture and its functional expansion inside the closed Iranian society have led blogs to become much more than what they may be in open societies. One peculiarity of Persian blogs can be observed in the use of a new Persian sociolect of weblog (and chat room) communication. The use of this sociolect reflects an effort by the younger generation of Iranians to redefine their identities and distance themselves from the burden of a traditional (religious) culture that they wish to defy.

Finally, the functional expansion of blogs has also made them into a replacement for non-existent platforms for free political expression. Because of their individual nature, blogs have promoted a new way of individualism. This “positive ego-centrism” seems to have triggered a movement towards emancipating politically active individuals from the restrictive force of the collective. In the long run, this movement will contribute to social changes by silently revolutionizing the political culture of Iran.

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